

## Employee Ethics Guide to Holiday and Social Events

Every year before the start of the holiday season, the Department Ethics Office receives a number of questions from employees and their business clients on the rules that govern employee participation at holiday and social events. In anticipation of this year's inquiries, the Office offers this guide to answer some frequently asked questions.

### Holiday Decorations

The Comptroller General ruled that Executive branch agencies may expend appropriated funds for reasonable seasonal decorations. Expenditures for seasonal decorations within the Department are limited to those for use

in the main entrances to the Department's buildings, or the Departmental work areas that are leased in privately owned buildings. Expenditures are not authorized for decorating private areas or areas where the benefit is primarily for the employees in that area.

Decorations should not be religious in nature, and should not endorse any particular religious belief.



### Alcohol

The use of alcoholic beverages in U.S. Government buildings is generally prohibited. However, GSA has delegated to the head of each agency the authority to waive this prohibition to serve its needs. Accordingly, the authority to permit the use of alcohol in the Main Interior or the South Interior buildings rests with the National Business Center (NBC). Offices hosting an upcoming function with a desire to serve alcoholic beverages in those buildings must call the NBC (208-7182) for approval.

### Acceptance of Gifts

#### *Gifts from outside domestic sources.*

Generally, employees may not solicit or accept a gift from a prohibited source. A

"prohibited source" for the most part, is a person or organization that has or plans to have business dealings with the Department. However, regulations do provide an exception which allows employees to accept gifts valued at up to \$20 (per occasion) from a prohibited source as long as the total value of the gifts do not exceed \$50 in a calendar from the same source. There are a number of other exceptions to this restriction. Refer to 5 CFR 2635.204.

#### *Gifts Between Employees.*

Generally, an employee is prohibited from donating to, or soliciting contributions for a gift to an official supervisor, or from accepting a gift from an employee receiving less pay than himself or herself.

There are exceptions to this rule, especially when the two employees are not in a supervisor-subordinate relationship; and when there is a personal relationship between the two employees that would justify the gift.

Another exception to this restriction allows employees to give their supervisor a gift to celebrate an infrequent occasion such as

the birth of a child, retirement, etc. The gift should have a market value not to exceed \$10. This exception is based on the provision under 5 CFR 2635.304.

#### *Gifts from Foreign Governments.*

If a gift is offered from a component of a foreign government, the employee may personally accept the gift if its market value is \$260 or less. If the market value of the gift exceeds \$260, the employee may accept the gift on behalf of the United States.

#### *No Refusal Gift Acceptance Policy.*

All Department employees may accept gifts offered to them by representatives of Indian Tribes, Alaska Native Organizations, Insular and foreign governments when refusal to accept such gifts would be likely to cause offense or embarrassment or otherwise adversely affect relations with the United States.

In such cases, gifts that have a market value that exceed the dollar threshold (\$20 for domestic gifts and \$260 for foreign gifts) for personal acceptance shall be deposited with the bureau property officer.



**Soliciting Contributions**

Employees may solicit voluntary contributions of nominal amounts from fellow employees on an occasional basis for items such as food and refreshments to be shared among employees. It is important to note that a contribution is not voluntary unless it is made in an amount determined by the contributing employee. Regulations also require a statement that an employee may choose to contribute less, or not at all, to accompany any request for contributions.



**Holiday Cards**

Unless authorized by statute or regulation, the purchase, printing and delivery of holiday cards may not be done at the Government’s expense. The distribution of holiday cards has long been considered to be a personal rather than an official function. Accordingly, holiday cards may not be sent in Government franked or penalty mail envelopes.

**Business Related Parties and Related Events**

Employees may accept invitations to parties or related events that are sponsored by a prohibited source if: (1) they have the approval of their supervisor; and (2) the gift of food, beverage, and entertainment does not exceed \$20 in value for each event and no more than \$50 in total from the same source for the calendar year.

Employees may also accept invitations to widely attended holiday events, with prior supervisory approval, when it has been determined that the employee’s attendance at the event will be in the interest of the Department because it will further enhance the Department’s programs and operations.

Supervisory approval to attend the event is documented on Form DI-1958. Supervisors asked to approve an employee’s Form DI-1958 are advised that the employee’s acceptance of free attendance to a widely attended event should not be granted if the donor is a person or organization other than the sponsor of the event and the value of the gift of free attendance exceeds \$250 and fewer than 100 people are expected to attend the event.

Form DI-1958 may be downloaded from the Department Ethics Office Web Site at:

[www.doi.gov/ethics/ethics.html](http://www.doi.gov/ethics/ethics.html)

It is important to note that this reference should only be used as a guide. If you would like to obtain more information on the provisions covered in this guide, go to the web site address stated above or contact your servicing ethics counselor.

**Department Ethics Office**

**“Making ethics a part of the workplace”**



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